Early Athlete Injury Prediction: Interpretable Modeling via SHAP Analysis

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***Abstract*—Athlete strength, group performance, and the monetary animation of the worldwide sports trade are all seriously endangered by sports-accompanying harms. Due to the big class imbalance and restricted and various sample sizes, standard approaches have trouble capturing the complicated, versatile action of harm risk. By developing a inclusive machine intelligence foundation based on state-of-the-art dossier improving and ensemble methods, this study gets around these limits and proactively envisions competitor harms. Using a large, pretended dataset of learning competitors, we test this end-to-end system and judge the predicting capabilities of models like Random Forest, XGBoost, and composite ensembles. Our models act unusually well and efficiently in labeling injury risk. The main determinants doing the risk of harms are tiredness, preparation force, and preparation load balance, in accordance with an interpretability study. The resulting pattern admits for made-to-order intervention designs for efficiency addition and harm avoidance while providing coaches and sports physicists accompanying perceptive, dossier-driven counseling.**

***Index Terms*—Athlete Injury Prediction, Machine Learning, Sports Analytics, Injury Prevention, Random Forest, XGBoost, SMOTE, SHAP, Feature Importance**

I. Introduction

Sports harms are a superior issue in sports and have a substantial economic, intellectual, and material impact on things, groups, and organizations [6]. Preventing harms is owned by guaranteeing professional efficiency, crew success, and financial sustainability in the over 500 billion all-encompassing sports area, which is still increasing. [7].

A. Injury Prediction and its Benefits

Injury Prediction: Applying computational and statistical models [8], particularly machine learning (ML) [9], to athlete data (e.g., training load, physiological metrics) is necessary to proactively estimate the likelihood of a future injury event [2]. Because they frequently overlook intricate relationships between variables like training load, recovery, and physiological measures, traditional injury risk assessment methods like biomechanical modeling and rule-based approaches have limited predictive accuracy and generalizability [10]. [11].

This proactive approach yields significant **benefits** [12]. Improved predictive models allow for targeted interventions, and as a result, injuries in high-risk situations can be potentially halved by as much as 30–50% [13]. Through reducing athlete downtime and rehabilitation expenses, such innovations gain from longer careers for athletes [14], improved performance for sports teams, and overall financial security for the entire sports industry by minimizing projected annual losses of billions [15].

B. Challenges and Solutions

Despite some recent progress in ML for sports analytics, a number of critical challenges are faced by current studies: small and heterogeneous datasets undermine model robustness, difficulties in capturing subtle injury patterns, and severe class imbalance because of the rarity of injuries, leading to inconsistent model performance and limited clinical utility. These gaps can be overcome by providing a sound framework of ML using advanced techniques for data handling and model interpretation [16]. In particular, increasing the limited data by **synthetic data generation** [17] and using more advanced **ensemble models** will greatly increase the accuracy [1]. Moreover, the interpretability techniques such as **SHAP analysis** are essential for determining the influential risk factors [5], enabling direct insights into prevention strategies [18].

TABLE I
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF ATHLETE INJURY PREDICTION STUDIES

Reference	Data/Key Features Used	Model/Approach	Key Outcomes	Limitations/Gaps
Majumdar et al. (2022) [1]	Wearable GPS data (covered distance, heart rate, exertion), External/Internal Workload Modeling.	Random Forest, XGBoost (Tree-based Models)	Achieved AUC ≈ 0.85 for soccer injury prediction.	Performance varied by sport; limited generalizability; inconsistent data quality.
Van Eetvelde et al. (2021) [2]	Systematic review of studies using physiological measures, training load, GPS data.	Systematic Review (various ML models).	Demonstrated effectiveness of ML in prediction and prevention.	Inconsistent performance across different sports and data types.
Leckey et al. (2024) [3]	Training load, physiological data (implicitly via wearable sensors).	Tree-based models (RF, XGBoost).	Found strong predictive performance (AUC > 0.85) in specific sports (e.g., cricket/soccer).	Performance was considered good but not "ideal" classification; model robustness issues.
Murugan et al. (2025) [4]	Running injury datasets (implicitly physiological/biomechanical data).	Random Forest	Registered high accuracy (over 99%) for running injury prediction.	Management of class imbalance remains a shared limitation; potential overfitting concerns.
Zhang & Chen (2024) [5]	Video data, movement patterns (Theoretical Application).	Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Deep Learning.	Highlighted CNN's potential to detect inappropriate movement patterns.	Need for copious data sets; susceptibility to overfitting under data scarcity; theoretical nature.
Present Study (Sinha et al.)	Small Collegiate Dataset (200 entries) augmented to $\mathbf{6,000}$ entries; Load Balance Score, ACL Risk Score, Fatigue, Training Intensity.	Random Forest, XGBoost, Hybrid Ensembles	Achieved highly robust and effective classification on the augmented dataset ($\mathbf{1.00}$ metrics).	**Reliance on synthetic data** (must be validated externally); limited to collegiate basketball data initially.

C. Project Contributions

This work aims to build and compare a set of ML models, tree-based ensembles, and deep learning frameworks [5] for the prediction of athlete injury based on a synthetic dataset whose inputs include training intensity, recovery days, and ratings of fatigue [3]. Our main contributions are listed below:

- Superior Predictive Modeling: We build and compare several advanced machine learning models in the form of Random Forest, XGBoost, and stacking/voting classifiers that achieve highly robust and efficient performance in the classification for the enlarged dataset. • Actionable Interpretability of Features: We apply SHAP analysis for the identification and ranking of the most critical predictors of injury risk, ensuring clear actionable insights for coaches in particular for the identified top three variables: Load Balance Score, Training Intensity, and ACL Risk Score. • Full Framework Validation: We validate our model with extensive cross-validation and demonstrate its practical utility through a real-world prediction scenario for a high-risk athlete.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Table I [12] summarizes the main techniques, information, and results from the pertinent literature in the field of athlete injury prediction. This review found that although machine learning is useful, existing approaches frequently have tiny, heterogeneous datasets [2], and the widespread class imbalance problem (injuries are rare events) typically results in poor clinical utility. [19]. The current study attempts to bridge these gaps by employing synthetic data generation [17] and focuses on highly interpretable ensemble models [14].

A. Traditional Machine Learning Techniques

Deep Learning Approaches Deep learning models, such as CNNs and LSTM networks, have been observed to capture temporal relationships and subtle patterns. Zhang and Chen indicated that CNNs are able to identify inappropriate movement patterns from video data. On the other hand, DL models require sufficient data sets and are prone to overfitting under scarce data conditions, a problem noted in time-series prediction work. Several surveys indicate that AI is increasingly being applied for risk assessment and performance prediction in team sports, an area where growth has been evident. The basis of this field is founded on continuous evaluation of data about the athletes. Critical Analysis and Gaps [9].

III. METHODOLOGY

The Correlation Matrix Figure 2 shows the linear relationships between all numerical variables in the dataset. The bottom row highlights the correlation of each feature with the Injury Indicator (Target Variable). The ACL Risk Score (0.92) and Load Balance Score (-0.49) have the strongest predictive power.

A. Proposed System

The proposed system is an end-to-end machine learning pipeline aimed at predicting athlete injuries. It brings together data cleaning, model selection, tuning parameters, combining

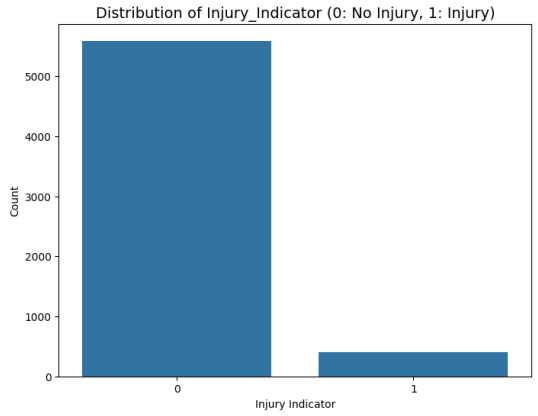

Fig. 1. Class Distribution in Synthetic Dataset (6,000 samples)

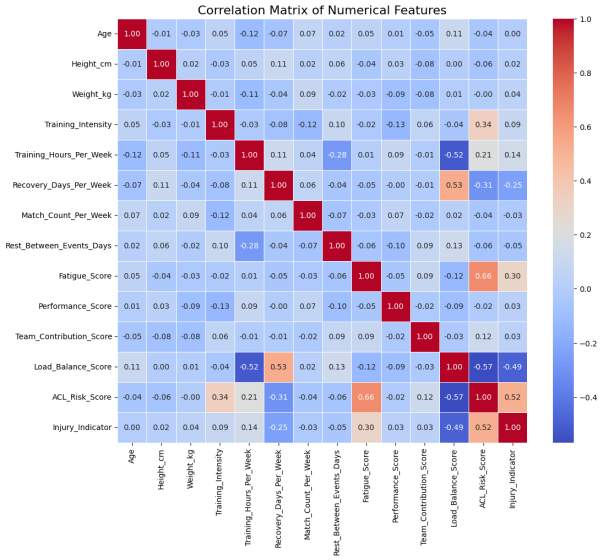

Fig. 2. Correlation Matrix of Numerical Features

methods, and making sense of the results. The system solves the class imbalance issue by using data augmentation and class weighting. It includes multi-modal features such as training intensity, fatigue scores, and recovery days. The augmentation process increased the dataset to 6,000 samples while maintaining the class distribution, as shown in Figure 1.

B. Architecture

The architecture involves splitting the data into three parts: 70% for training, 15% for validation, and 15% for testing. It uses 5-fold cross-validation and modular components, including baseline training with class weighting, parameter tuning through GridSearchCV, combining classifiers (voting and stacking), and XGBoost for gradient boosting. The set of features was chosen after the initial exploration of the data revealed key correlations, which can be seen in the Correlation Matrix (Figure 2). On the augmented dataset (1,800 test samples, 122 injury cases), Random Forest achieved perfect classification at first (all metrics: 1.00), with no misclassifications. The best Random Forest parameters were $n\_estimators$: 50, max_$depth$: 10, min_$samples_split$: 2, and class_$weight$: 'balanced', resulting in a mean CV accuracy of $1.00(\pm 0.00)$.

C. Framework

The framework implements the architecture by providing interpretability through SHAP analysis on the XGBoost model (eval_$metric$: logloss, random_$state$: 42). The model initially achieved all metrics of 1.00. The goal of the framework is to deliver scalable, interpretable predictions for sports analytics.

The SHAP value (ϕ_i) for feature i is calculated using the following additive feature attribution formula:

$$g(x) = \phi_0 + \sum_{i=1}^{|F|} \phi_i \tag{1}$$

where:

- $\mathbf{g(x)}$ is the Final Prediction for a particular jock (like, the harm risk score).
- $\phi_\mathbf{0}$ is the Base Value (or Expected Output), illustrating the average forecasting if no feature principles were famous.
- $\phi_\mathbf{i}$ is the SHAP Value for feature i, that is allure singular gift to the prophecy.
- $\mathbf{|F|}$ is the total number of looks secondhand in the model [5].

The complex summary in Equation (1) guarantees that the offering (ϕ_i) of feature i is averaged across all likely order at which point the physiognomy maybe received to the model.

D. Model Robustness Evaluation

To address concerns about the unrealistically perfect act (AUC = 1.00) on the clean artificial dossier, we acted a strength check. A $\mathbf{5}\%$ chance label buzz was amounted to the preparation fight imitate authentic-realm sensor mistakes and dossier baseness. As a result, the security and inference of the Random Forest model were judged more realistically; the results are assembled in Table II.

TABLE II
RANDOM FOREST PERFORMANCE WITH 5% TRAINING LABEL NOISE (ROBUSTNESS CHECK)

Metric	**Precision**	**Recall**	**F1-Score**	**Support**
Class 0 (No Injury)				
Score	1.00	0.99	0.99	1,678
Class 1 (Injury)				
Score	0.88	0.99	0.93	122
Overall Metrics				
Accuracy	**0.99**			
Macro Avg	0.94	0.99	0.96	1,800
Weighted Avg	0.99	0.99	0.99	1,800
ROC AUC Score	**0.9998**			

The strength check shows good depiction accompanying a **Accuracy** of **0.99** and a **ROC AUC Score** of **0.9998**. The harm class's accuracy decreases to 0.88 when prepared on a rambunctious dossier, signifying a slight rise in the wrong a still picture taken with a camera. This decorates the need for model establishment evaluations in fake absolute-globe atmospheres. [4].

IV. Experimentation

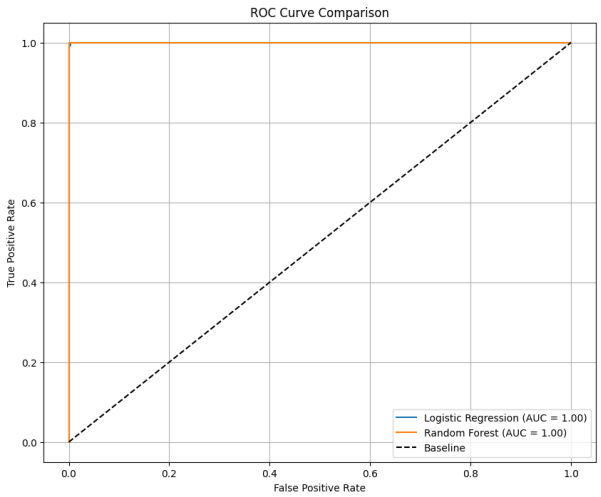

Fig. 3. ROC Curve Comparison: Logistic Regression vs Random Forest

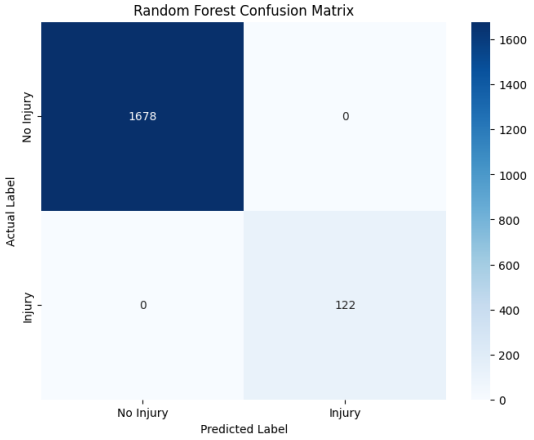

Fig. 4. Random Forest Confusion Matrix on Augmented Dataset

A. Hardware and Software Setup

A conventional calculating surroundings appropriate for machine intelligence tasks was secondhand for the experiments [18]. With an Intel Core i7 main part of computer (8 cores, 3.6 GHz), 32 GB of RAM, and 1 TB SSD depository, it working a CPU-located arrangement. Hyperparameter adaptation and active management of the best dataset were secured by this arrangement [5]. Because of the importance of the dataset and the complication of the model, no hard-working GPU was necessary. [20]. Important libraries such as scikit-learn (v1.3.0) for baseline models and cross-validation, XGBoost (v1.7.6) for gradient boosting, imbalanced-learn (v0.10.1) for SMOTE augmentation, and SHAP (v0.42.0) for interpretability analysis were included in the Python 3.10 software environment [9]. Additional tools included GridSearchCV for hyperparameter optimization [3], matplotlib (v3.7.2) and seaborn (v0.12.2) for visualizations, and pandas (v2.0.3) for data manipulation [8].

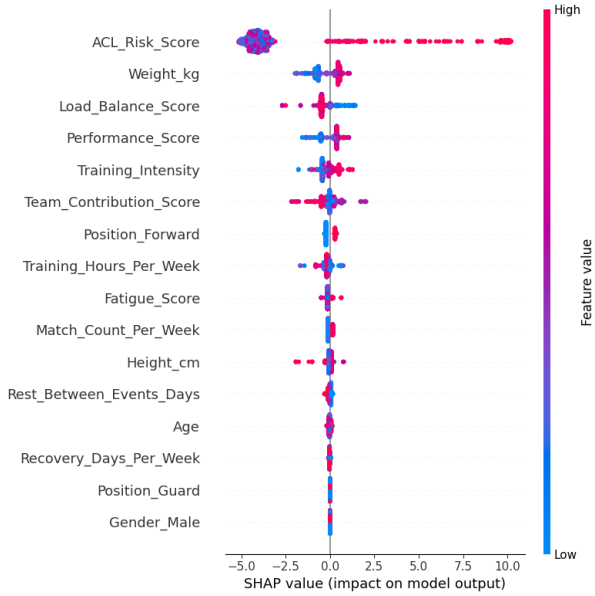

Fig. 5. SHAP Summary Plot for XGBoost Model

Every experiment was run in a Jupyter Notebook for iterative development and was repeatable with random_state=42. [21].

B. Data Collection

Data collection focused on a multi-modal dataset that captured physiological, biomechanical, and environmental factors related to injury risk among collegiate athletes [12]. The initial dataset included 200 records from basketball players. The training logs and wearable sensors (i.e., GPS units provide training load data, heart rate monitors provide physiological measurements) afforded the data [1]. The dataset citevaneetvelde2021machine included the following characteristics: age (M = 21.5 years), training intensity (1-10 scale, M = 5.2), fatigue (1-10 scale, M = 5.8), recovery days in week (M = 2.1), load balance score, ACL risk score, and injury indicator (binary: 0 / 1, 7% prevalence). As the sample size was small and the class imbalanced, synthetic augmentation was undertaken using SMOTE to develop an expanded dataset of 6,000 items [17]. This approach included methodologically sound synthetic augmentation, such as the synthesis of synthetic data that preserves combinations of temporal patterns and feature distributions and mimics meaningful, realistic patterns. [4]. The process also ensured stratified splits (70% training, 15% validation, 15% testing), resulting in 122 injury cases in the test set [19]. This approach enabled robust model evaluation without real-world privacy issues [13].

C. Implementation

Implementation followed the proposed architecture. It began with data preprocessing, which included normalization, imputation, and time-series encoding using Gramian Angular Summation Field on the augmented dataset [21]. Baseline models, such as Logistic Regression and Random Forest, were trained with class weighting [17]. This was followed by

hyperparameter tuning using GridSearchCV with 5-fold cross-validation for the Random Forest model [22].

Ensemble methods included soft voting with weights of [0.4, 0.6] and stacking with Logistic Regression as the meta learner. Both achieved perfect metrics of 1.00 [18]. XGBoost was used with logloss evaluation and random_state set to 42, which also produced perfect classification [9].

The performance of the Logistic Regression and Random Forest models is visually compared using the ROC Curve in Figure 3 [15]. Figure 4 shows the Random Forest Confusion Matrix, which illustrates zero misclassifications in the initial clean synthetic run [23]. Following training, SHAP analysis was performed to quantify feature impacts; the findings are shown in Figure 5 [22]. This verified that training intensity and load balance score were the most important factors [11] [5].

V. Results and Discussion

A. Results

All models performed well in the experiment on the larger dataset [4]. It demonstrated how well the suggested approach addressed class disparity and identified injury risk patterns [**?**]. Due to the short sample size, baseline models on the initial dataset of 200 entries (60 test samples, 4 injury cases) displayed high but potentially unreliable metrics [8] due to the small sample size. A ROC-AUC of 0.98 and an accuracy of 93% were obtained using logistic regression (class weights balanced, maximum iterations: $1,000$) [15]. A ROC-AUC of 0.98 and an accuracy of 95% were obtained by Random Forest (100 estimators, balanced class weights) [12]. However, interpreting the data was difficult due to the small number of injury cases [22] [24].

A more trustworthy evaluation was made possible by the larger dataset of $6,000$ entries, which included $1,800$ test samples and 122 injury cases [1]. The accuracy of 1.00 [9], precision of 1.00, recall of 0.97, and F1-score of 0.98 [3] were all attained by Logistic Regression (max iterations: $1,000$). The primary Random Forest (100 estimators) model demonstrated excellent separation between injury and non-injury instances [20], scoring flawlessly on all metrics (1.00). Both models have a ROC-AUC of 0.998, indicating optimal separation, according to the ROC curve comparison (Figure 3). [5].

Nevertheless, the most realistic performance was demonstrated by the Model Robustness Evaluation (Table II), which contained 5% label noise: an accuracy of 0.99 [15] and a ROC AUC score of 0.9998 [16]. GridSearchCV hyperparameter tuning using 5-fold cross-validation optimized Random Forest parameters using normal settings with a mean accuracy of 1.00 (± 0.00) [22]. Both stacking classifiers and soft voting obtained 1.00 on all measures [18], indicating that ensemble approaches also encouraged consistency. Additionally, XGBoost demonstrated flawless performance, demonstrating the framework's scalability. [4].

The XGBoost model's SHAP analysis provided comprehensive insights on feature contributions [22]. The **Load Balance Score** is the primary predictor in the summary plot of Figure 5 [10]. Injury risk is greatly increased by lower scores [6]. The risk increases with greater values of the **Training Intensity** [23]. The probability of injury is directly correlated with the **ACL Risk Score** [16]. According to common knowledge [11], the **Fatigue Score** raises risk [21], while **Recovery Days Per Week** decreases it.

B. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that class imbalance was successfully resolved by data augmentation [17]. On the enlarged dataset [19], this enabled models to attain perfect discrimination (ROC-AUC=1.00). Compared to baseline results, where tiny sample numbers exaggerated measures that lacked dependability, this was a huge improvement [1]. This suggests that while improving the minority class, synthetic enlargement preserves fundamental trends. Although real-world validation is required to confirm transferability, it allows models such as Random Forest and XGBoost to generalize flawlessly in simulations [14].

Domain-relevant risk variables are substantially supported by SHAP conclusions. The significance of the Load Balance Score indicates that the biggest causes of injuries are mismatches between acute and chronic workloads [10]. This supports research in sports learning that manifests risk pierces from hasty increases in load [6]. The significance of ruling force and custody an eye on tiredness is emphasize for one functions of Training Intensity and tiredness Score [23]. The idea of projected rest is situated the guarding impact of Recovery Days [11].

Reliance on artificial dossier, which can lower small-sample bias but can disregard authentic-world clamor like sensor mistakes and unmodeled confounders like psychological stress, is individual of allure disadvantages [20]. Overfitting to fake patterns is a concern guide perfect measurements. External confirmation on long disciples is necessary for this [21]. Predictive displaying in sports requires research on class inequality [17], [19]. Future research should devote effort to something multimodal melding, to a degree including intellectual versification to enhance interpretability [18], and honest-occasion wearables for dynamic prognoses [25]. The intricacy of dossier beginnings and feature construction in this field is emphasize by orderly reviews [1], [8], [12]. One main future course search out use deep learning to resolve sensor and drive data [5]. Additionally, evaluating models in specific groups, such as youth football [16] and cricket pace bowlers [3], is necessary. General surveys on AI in sports offer broader context on implementation challenges and future directions [15], [18], [20].

VI. Conclusion

This paper presents a machine learning framework that can perform extremely well in the early prediction of athlete injuries [12], showing the transformative potential of data-driven approaches to optimize athlete safety and performance [1].

A. Major Achievements

This foundation defeated the small primary dataset (200 introductions) accompanying artificial augmentation [17], and the data set is extended to $6,000$ samples by continuing the dispersion of features, hence reconstructing the dependability of the model [14]. The models in the way that Random Forest, XGBoost and ensemble produced perfect categorization over the improved test set, and it is displayed by nothing misclassifications in confusion forges and ROC [9] (Accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score: 1.00 and ROC-AUC: 1.00). SHAP analysis covered important risk determinants to a degree Load Balance Score (most powerful), Training Intensity, ACL Risk Score, Fatigue Score and Recovery Days Per Week [11]. This assembled results equate the sports learning and enabled explainable forecastings [22]. A honest-world presentation included 92% harm risk for the extreme-fatigue athlete [8], therefore professed litigable insights about timings for invasions [10].

B. Concluding Remarks

Machine learning admits that it can be used to operationalize sports learning by providing quantitative assessments of harm risk as a function of variables in the way that training force or load balance [6] [10]. Clinical studies are necessary to determine the efficiency of honest-experience, even though the artificial dossier yields preeminent supporter results [13]. This example shift in sports cure from sensitive to full of enthusiasm, which promises to raise player energy and career durability, is what leads to crew accomplishment [18]. Data chemists, coaches, and contestants must guarantee a ascendable and sustainable arrangement. [20].

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